

VZCZCXRO4395  
PP RUEHPB  
DE RUEHWL #0910/01 3242052  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 202052Z NOV 06  
FM AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3505  
INFO RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 4611  
RUEHPB/AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY 0611  
RUEHSV/AMEMBASSY SUVA 0531  
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY 0478  
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHDC  
RHHJJAA/JICPAC HONOLULU HI  
RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC CAMP H M SMITH HI  
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHINGTON DC  
RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 WELLINGTON 000910

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STATE FOR D (FRITZ), EAP/FO, OES/OA, AND EAP/ANP  
NSC FOR VICTOR CHA  
SECDEF FOR OSD/ISD JESSICA POWERS  
PACOM FOR J01E/J2/J233/J5/SJFHQ

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/20/2021

TAGS: [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [PREL](#) [NZ](#) [TN](#)

SUBJECT: NEW ZEALAND ACTIVE IN TONGA AND FIJI

Classified By: DCM David J. Keegan. Reasons: E.O. 12958, 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Alan Williams, Deputy Director at New Zealand's Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade, told the DCM November 20 that the current crisis in Tonga resulted from economic and political problems that have been developing over many months, but appeared to have abated. The Tongan Government was in disarray. For example, within 24 hours it requested, canceled, and then requested again military and police forces from Australia and New Zealand. Fiji remains a concern, and New Zealand has not yet decided whether it will allow Bainimarama to visit later this week for his granddaughter's First Communion. Williams looks forward to discussing these issues next week in Washington. End summary.

¶2. (C) Williams said that it had been a busy few weeks on Pacific Island issues, and he had spent much of the weekend on the cell phone with Prime Minister Helen Clark's party in Vietnam to discuss developments both in Tonga and Fiji. In the middle of our meeting, Williams took a call from Andrea Smith, Foreign Policy Advisor for the Prime Minister, currently in Sydney en route back from Vietnam, informing him that there would be a meeting early tomorrow, Tuesday, morning to review ongoing developments in the Pacific Island Countries.

Tonga: A Crisis When the Tsunami Appeared Past  
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¶3. (C) Tonga has been a focus of concern at MFAT for many months. Williams noted that he had done a memo last spring laying out what he described then as the 'coming tsunami' of economic and political challenges facing the island nation. The economic storm was driven by a current accounts deficit and a bloated public sector. The political storm came from increasing pressure for democratic reforms, made only worse this autumn by the accession of a new king with little apparent understanding or sympathy for political reform. In the late spring and early summer, the Tongan government reduced the size of the government bureaucracy by twenty percent and began to get the current accounts deficit under control. In the last few weeks, Tonga's Prime Minister had reviewed the series of proposals for greater democracy, including calls for a larger percentage of elected seats in the national parliament, and responded with what Williams considered a very constructive proposal. There was a

sense that the storm might have passed.

14. (C) A failure to consult, rather than resistance to democratic change, appears to be what provoked demonstrations and violence. There was, Williams assessed, a sense by reform proponents that they were being excluded from influence on the reform process that they had initiated. It was that frustration that appears to have led to the demonstrations and eventual violence. Williams added that it was clear that the violence had clearly been planned, that rioters were being provided with Molotov cocktails and the like and sent out onto the streets.

15. (C) The riots had caught the Tongan government, as well as Canberra and Wellington, off guard. The result was confusion and contradiction. For example, the Tongan Prime Minister had called Williams Thursday evening, November 17, to request that New Zealand together with Australia provide troops to help control the violence. After consultation with the Prime Minister on the road and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, MFAT approved the dispatch of forces. Forty minutes before the NZ military aircraft took off for Tonga, Williams got a second call asking that New Zealand and Australia not send forces. Later on Friday, Tonga reversed course again and asked the forces be provided. Williams said he had, in the interim, made it clear to the Tongan government that no commercial flights would resume without complete security at the international airport.

16. (C) New Zealand, in coordination with Australia, agreed once more to provide forces. However, the Prime Minister's office made it clear that she did not want to see NZ forces put in a situation where they would appear to be defending the current Tongan Government against democracy advocates. New Zealand did

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agree to provide an additional twenty or so police forces to assist in forensic and arson investigations in the Tongan capital, Nuku'alofa. Williams said NZ would seek over the near future to transition its Tonga deployment to more police and fewer military. The Tongan Government has informed NZ that some of those suspected of instigating the violence of the past few days are trying to depart Tonga on board Air New Zealand flights, scheduled to resume today. NZ has made it clear that it would prefer to have the Tongans act to prevent their boarding, rather than having to decide itself on this issue.

17. (C) A senior New Zealand consultant, Dr. Andrew Ladley, Director of the Institute of Policy Studies in the School of Government at Victoria University in Wellington, is currently in Tonga, on an MFAT grant, helping the government rewrite its government manuals. Last Thursday, he participated in a series of meetings by the Tongan cabinet and Privy Council (the cabinet in session with the King), which were coping with the developing protests and violence. Williams said that Ladley encouraged the government, he thought with some success, to be responsive to the protestors' demands, while remaining within the bounds of what the constitution allowed the government to do.

18. (C) Separately, MFAT told POLOff that the New Zealand High Commission in Nuku'alofa anticipates that the King will make a speech (now being drafted) later in the week. NZ MFAT will be looking at that speech with interest as it develops an assistance package. The package, being led by NZAID with substantial input from the Department of Prime Minister in Cabinet, includes reconstruction assistance and provision of skilled arbiters. Deputy Director of the MFAT's Pacific Division, Peter Heenan, said that a similar offer of arbitration was extended during the public service crisis last year, but that the offer was not taken up. NZDF along with Australian counterparts have secured the airport, and Air New Zealand has resumed flights. Heenan said that there is no hard deadline for the end of the NZDF deployment, but that a one-week deployment is currently anticipated. Tonga defense forces have locked-down the central business district, and the NZ High Commissioner reported difficulty getting to work.

## Continuing Concern over Fiji

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¶9. (C). NZ also remains concerned that the political situation in Fiji remains murky and that an evacuation may become necessary. If so, the PM has said that any NZ intervention should be limited to protection of evacuation operations; NZ does not want to see a situation in which NZ forces might be sent to Fiji and confront the Fijian armed forces, who have extensive experience in presumably violent operational environments in the Middle East and elsewhere.

¶10. (C) The political climate in Fiji is difficult to gauge, given Bainimarama's confrontational approach to the Prime Minister and the Council of Chiefs, as well as the apparent widespread support for his political demands. New Zealand has still not decided how to respond to the request from Bainimarama for permission to visit next weekend to attend his granddaughter's First Communion. Williams said that the decision would need to be made in the next two days, but that there is still no clear indication of what that decision might be.

## Visit to Washington

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¶11. (SBU) Williams said that he is looking forward to discussing Pacific Island developments, as well as other areas in his portfolio -- the Middle East and Africa -- during his visit to Washington next week.

McCormick